



Montana DNRC Forestry Division

FIRE AND AVIATION MANAGEMENT

Aviation

Equipment Development and Support

Fire Prevention

Fire Suppression

National Fire Plan

Training

National Fire Plan

*Reducing Wildfire Risks
to Communities and
the Environment*



Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Forestry Division Fire and Aviation Management Bureau National Fire Plan

The National Fire Plan (NFP) was developed in response to the severe wildfire season of 2000, and is intended to provide guidance for activities needed to reduce the impacts of wildfire on communities and to ensure that effective capacity exists for fighting future wildfires. The NFP addresses five key points: (1) Increase in preparedness and fire suppression capabilities; (2) Restoration and rehabilitation of burned areas; (3) Reduction of hazardous fuels; (4) Community assistance; and (5) Accountability to the public and Congress.

Implementation of the NFP is guided by a *10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* and an implementation plan developed by the Western Governors' Association, *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildfire Risks to Communities and the Environment*. DNRC helps implement the NFP in Montana in cooperation with federal, state, tribal, and local partners, and is responsible for administering and delivering a number of federally-funded NFP programs on state and private lands.



Accomplishments

Since inception of the National Fire Plan, DNRC and its partners have treated more than 6,500 acres of private land in the wildland/urban interface. This represents a reduced wildfire risk to hundreds of homes and millions of dollars in property value.

Goal

Reduce wildfire risks to communities and the environment by helping to implement the National Fire Plan in Montana.

A Collaborative, Community-based Approach Provides the Coordination Essential to Mitigating Wildfire Risks

Over 180 Montana communities are on the federal list of wildland/urban interface (WUI) communities within the vicinity of federal lands that are at high risk from wildfire. Mitigating wildfire risks for these communities is a huge challenge, given the extent of the work needed to mitigate risk, the cost of the work, and the number of landowners in need of assistance. Collaboration among federal, state, tribal, and local agencies and private landowners as well as coordination across land ownership boundaries is essential to meeting this challenge. Just as wildfires cross ownership boundaries, so must efforts to reduce the vulnerability of Montana communities.

The NFP and the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy collaborative implementation plan provide a framework that encourages collaboration. Interagency collaboration in Montana is additionally facilitated by the Montana Fire Hazard Coordinating Committee, whose members include the DNRC and other state and federal agencies and associations with responsibilities for mitigating wildfire hazards. Collaboration makes it possible to identify and map areas of wildfire risk, to develop plans to mitigate risk, to coordinate work on public and private lands, and to prioritize projects so that limited resources are used to mitigate the highest risks.

The National Fire Plan

Why a National Fire Plan?

Nearly 7 million acres burned throughout the U.S. during the severe wildfire season of 2000, including over 1 million acres in Montana. While the 2000 wildfire season was extreme, officials recognized that conditions contributing to the severity of the season, such as unhealthy forests, years of fire suppression, and persistent drought in parts of the west, could contribute to more severe fire seasons in the future. Increasing development in the

wildland/urban interface (WUI) in many areas also meant that more properties were at risk, and that communities and the nation would likely continue to face the tremendous costs associated with wildfires unless a coordinated effort was mounted to reduce wildfire risks. The National Fire Plan (NFP) was developed to provide guidance for coordinating the efforts of federal, state, tribal, and local agencies and private landowners in planning and implementing the work needed to reduce wildfire risk throughout the country.



Bitterroot wildfire in 2000.

Implementation of the National Fire Plan in Montana

The USDA Forest Service and agencies belonging to the U.S. Department of the Interior (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) have responsibility for implementation of the NFP, and work in close cooperation with partners such as the DNRC to plan and implement projects.

Congress has provided funding to the states for NFP projects since 2001. The aim of this assistance is to reduce the risk of loss of human life, personal property, and other assets due to wildfire in the WUI. DNRC administers grants awarded through two federally-funded programs, the Western States WUI Grant Program and the Community Protection Program. To date, DNRC has administered over \$6 million in federal funding for projects which include hazard fuels reduction, information and education, and community and homeowner action.

"Montana's National Fire Plan program relies heavily upon federal funding. In fact, most projects would not be possible without the financial assistance from our federal partners, and we are grateful for the positive relationship that we share. As we move forward, our challenge will be to create a program that is sustainable without such heavy reliance on these funds. To this end, program investment from other sources will be vital. In addition, utilization of commercial products as a means to finance mitigation treatments should be encouraged wherever it is feasible." Bob Harrington, Montana State Forester

DNRC delivers the grants programs with the assistance of local partners such as Resource Conservation and Development Areas and fire districts that work directly with individual landowners. Working with local partners is desirable because it increases DNRC's efficiency in administering the programs, makes it possible to coordinate fuels treatments over larger areas, and enables more property owners to be assisted.

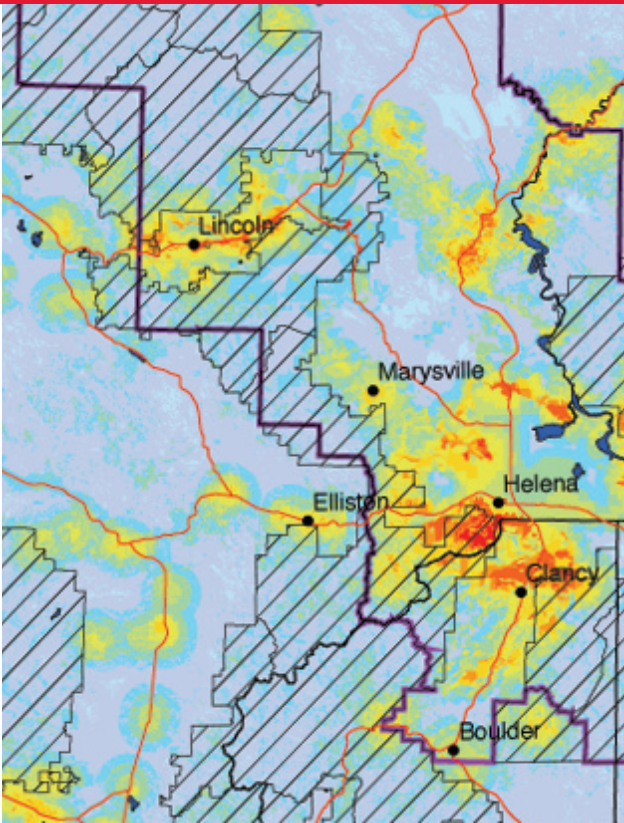
Partners Working Together to Implement the NFP

Montana Fire Hazard Coordinating Committee Members:

MT DNRC
MT Department of Disaster and
and Emergency Services
MT Association of Counties
MT Fire Wardens
MT Fire Chiefs
National Park Service
Natural Resources Conservation
Service
Bureau of Indian Affairs
USDA Forest Service
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Bureau of Land Management

Other Partners:

Tri-County Fire Working Group
MT RC&D Areas
MT Logging Association
MT Wood Products Association
Society of American Foresters
Bigfork Fire District
Frenchtown Fire District
Greenough/Potomac Volunteer
Fire District
Park County Volunteer Fire
District
Flathead Economic Policy Center
Swan Ecosystem Center
International Assn. of Fire Chiefs
Northern Rockies Coordinating
Group



Portion of a wildfire risk map prepared by the Tri-County Fire Working Group for Lewis and Clark, Jefferson, and Broadwater counties. Wildfire risk is based on population density, fire history, and fuel hazard. Areas are ranked from 1 to 12 in terms of increasing risk. The lowest risk areas are shaded pale blue; higher risk areas are shaded yellow and orange, with the highest risk shaded deep orange. The risk map is used to help prioritize fuels treatment projects.

The Importance of Planning in Wildfire Hazard Mitigation

With many communities and millions of acres at risk from wildfire, comprehensive planning is essential so that high-hazard areas can be identified, projects coordinated, and resources directed to areas with the greatest hazards. Most counties in Montana are either developing or have already developed a wildfire protection plan. The Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 provided incentives for communities to develop a community wildfire protection plan (CWPP). Developing a CWPP empowers communities to take an active role in managing lands within or near their municipal boundaries to protect them from wildfires and to mitigate losses from wildfires.

The requirements for a CWPP include collaboration in developing the plan, prioritized fuel reduction, and treatment of structural ignitability. The Bureau of Land Management has provided financial and technical assistance through the NFP to a number of counties for developing wildfire protection plans, and helping communities to develop CWPPs is a new focus for DNRC. DNRC's role includes being at the table as a collaborator while the plan is being developed and helping communities to determine whether their plan meets the requirements for a CWPP as defined by the HFRA.

Firewise: A Cornerstone of Montana's NFP Program

While government agencies can provide technical and financial assistance for hazardous fuel treatment and creation of defensible space on private lands, it is ultimately the responsibility of private landowners to reduce hazards on their property. The National Wildland/Urban Interface Fire Program created the Firewise Program to help inform landowners about the importance of creating defensible space on their property, and to help disseminate information about firewise practices that can help landowners and communities reduce wildfire hazards.

Firewise has produced numerous educational materials for property owners and firefighters that describe firewise practices in home construction, design and maintenance, and landscaping. Some communities in Montana have supplemented the Firewise program with their own

educational efforts. The Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development Area, Inc., for example, has developed a Fire Smart Wagon, a concessions trailer that has been equipped as a mobile education center and displayed at community events throughout western Montana.



Hazardous Fuels Treatment in the Wildland Urban Interface

Increased development in the wildland urban interface has put more property, structures, and businesses at risk of loss from wildfire.



Before fuels treatment work, structures lack defensible space.

After fuels treatment work, including thinning trees to reduce density, pruning low branches, and disposing of slash, defensible space now exists.



National Fire Plan funding administered by DNRC is used for projects which address three of the NFP's key points: increased preparedness and suppression capabilities, hazardous fuels reduction, and community assistance. Since federal funding first became available in 2001, DNRC has administered over \$6 million in grants that have helped its local partners implement projects that address these three key points.

Wildfire has been a regular and recurring natural phenomenon in Montana, and the state's natural ecosystems are adapted to the periodic occurrence of fire. Nearly a century of wildfire suppression has drastically altered Montana's forests, many of which now have a far higher tree density than in the past. Many forests have been stressed by drought and insect damage, and are susceptible to catastrophic wildfires. The popularity of the WUI as a site for development in Montana means that more properties are now at risk of loss from wildfire. A key focus of NFP-funded projects has been to carry out hazardous fuels reduction projects that help create defensible space on private property and create firebreaks that will help keep wildfire from spreading from forests into nearby residential areas.

The Value of Hazardous Fuels Treatment

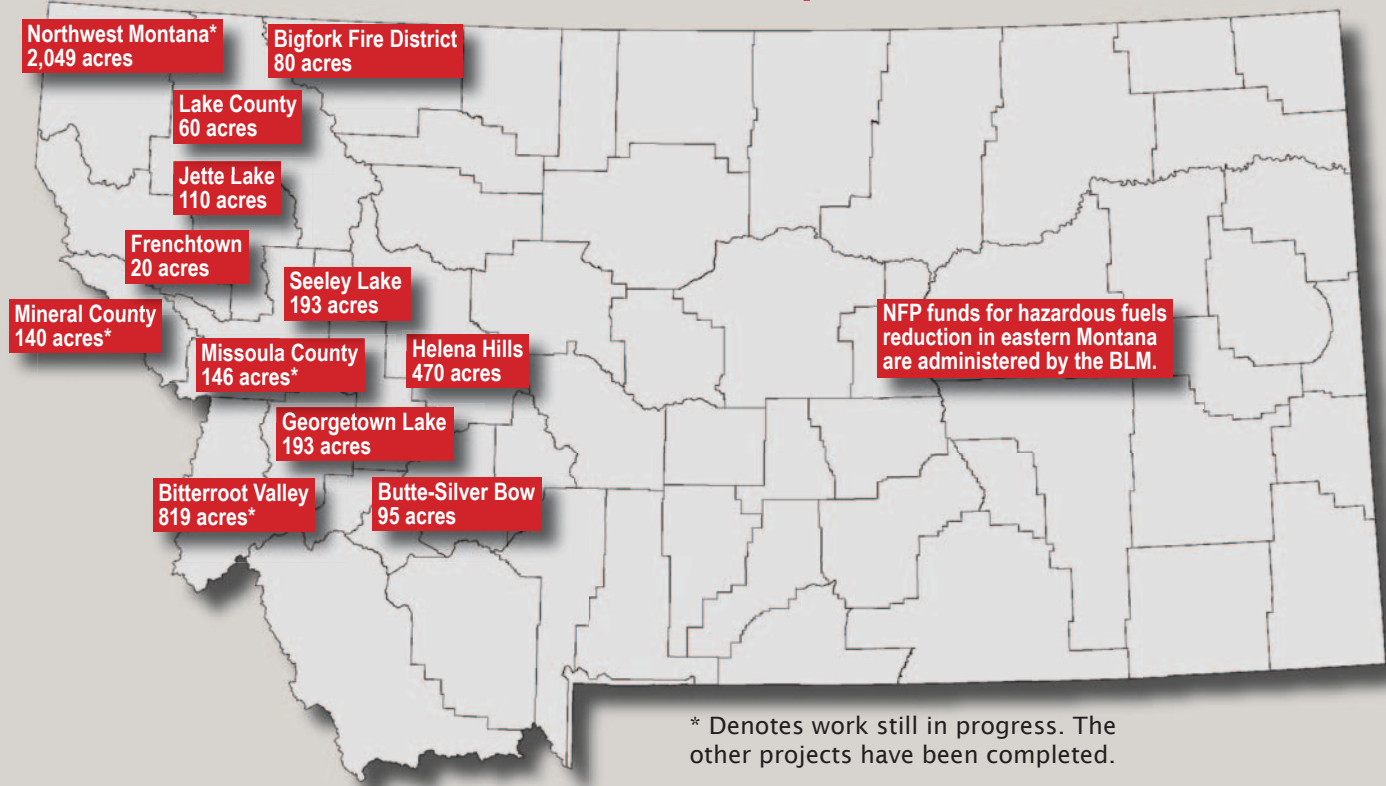
The average cost of hazardous fuels treatment in Montana is between \$760 and \$1,000 an acre, ranging from about \$250 to \$2,200. The per acre cost depends on factors including site conditions such as tree density, steepness of slope, and presence of infrastructure, the type of treatment employed (for example, whether by hand or machine, and the type of equipment used), the means used for slash disposal, and whether any of the material removed has commercial value that can offset some of the costs. Funds awarded through the NFP for hazardous fuels treatment on private land require a cost share from the landowners to cover a portion of the work. Most of the mitigation work for fuels treatment projects is done by private contractors.

The value of hazardous fuels treatments far exceeds the costs, in terms of creating defensible space and healthier forests less susceptible to catastrophic wildfires, insects, and disease.



"Our work provides a real service to the community. Benefits include healthier forests and increased property values. Our work also creates jobs and helps support the local economy." Rob Castellano, contractor

Examples of NFP Hazardous Fuels Treatment Projects Administered by DNRC



Local Partners Play Key Roles in Implementing NFP Projects

DNRC delivers NFP programs with the assistance of local partners. Some partners have used a portion of their NFP funding to hire part-time or full-time coordinators who are responsible for the important tasks of building and sustaining collaborative relationships among the many partners involved in wildfire hazard mitigation projects, working with private landowners and contractors who carry out the mitigation work, ensuring that work is carried out according to the terms of contracts and agreements, managing project finances, and reporting results to the DNRC. The equivalent of 10 to 12 full-time positions are currently supported by NFP funding to carry out this work, and are essential to the successful implementation of wildfire hazard mitigation projects.



Pat McKelvey, Lewis and Clark County Prevention and Mitigation Program, inspects a fuels treatment project.

Much of the actual fuels reduction work is carried out by private contractors with professional experience as arborists or foresters, who specialize in the work needed to reduce fuel loads and create defensible space. Contractors selectively thin and prune trees, remove brush, dispose of slash, and are experienced in working around structures and infrastructure that normally is not present in commercial logging projects. Hazardous fuels treatment projects have also created new jobs that are especially important in areas where traditional forest industries are declining.

"Local governments need the financial assistance provided through the National Fire Plan to make their wildfire hazard mitigation programs work." Pat McKelvey, Lewis and Clark County Prevention and Mitigation Program

Top cover photo of the Robert Fire by Karen Nichols, *Daily Inter Lake*, Kalispell, MT.

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